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# Socratic Dialectic between Philosophy and Politics in *Euthydemus* 305e5-306d1

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα  
ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.

Hesiod, *Theogony* 27-8.

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## ABSTRACT

In the final scene of the *Euthydemus*, Socrates argues that because the art of speechwriting merely partakes of the two good arts philosophy and politics, it places third in the contest for wisdom. I argue that this curious speech is a reverse eikos argument, directed at the speechwriters own eikos argument for the preeminence of their art. A careful analysis of the partaking relation reveals that it is rather Socratic dialectic which occupies this intermediate position between philosophy and politics. This result entails that Socrates' peculiar art is only a part of philosophy, and its practitioner only partially wise.

Keywords: Euthydemus, partaking argument, rhetoric, sophistry.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE PARTAKING ARGUMENT (305E5-306D1)

In his final address to Crito in the *Euthydemus*, Socrates improvises an elaborate deduction (305e5-306d1) for the claim that the art of speechwriting comes in third place, after philosophy and politics, in the contest for wisdom (σοφία). As Socrates explains, the basis of this poor showing is that speechwriting and its practitioners merely stand between and partake (μετέχειν) of philosophy and the art of politics. This curious speech (hereafter ‘the partaking argument’) has received virtually no serious attention in the scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> Its neglect is no doubt due to its apparently unserious nature: the argument as stated is obviously unsound; its premises are cryptic; and it utterly fails to clarify for Crito the real distinction between true and false educators (306d-307a). Indeed, Myles Burnyeat has suggested despairingly that in the face of these facts, we must conclude that Socrates is portrayed by Plato in this passage as *guying* the sophists: the obscurity of the argument and its apparent logic-chopping nature is meant to evoke and parody the eristic argumentation of the brothers Dionysodorus and Euthydemus.<sup>2</sup>

In my view, this interpretation is deeply mistaken. While Socrates’ argument is admittedly both obscure and playful, his final speech in the dialogue conceals a completely serious claim about the nature of Socratic wisdom which is also crucial to our understanding of the *Euthydemus* as a whole. The serious claim is that it is neither speechwriting nor sophistry but rather Socratic dialectic that lies between and partakes of philosophy and the political art. This thesis entails in turn that Socrates’ peculiar art is only a part of philosophy, and that its practitioner is only partially wise.

My defense and explanation of this claim is organized into four sections. I begin in section §1 by extracting the following initial gloss of the partaking relation from 305e5-306d1: an art X is a partaker of another art Y just in case the end at which X aims is identical to the end at which Y aims; but since X only partially shares in the relevant components that constitute Y, X will only imperfectly achieve the common end at which both X and Y aim. I then turn to consider a salient difference between the partaking argument of the *Euthydemus* and Socrates’ remarks on rhetoric and sophistry at *Gorgias* 462-465. The *Gorgias* explains the defects of these (so called) arts in terms of their imitation or imposture of true arts; the partaking argument by contrast attributes the inferiority of an art to its being a mere partaker of good arts. I explain this difference by pointing to the dialectical context of the partaking argument. The partaking argument replies to the following λόγος of the ‘speechwriters’ (οἱ λογοποιοί): anyone who partakes ‘μετρίως’ of both philosophy and politics is more likely to be successful in both private and public life than one who is wholly immersed in either of these arts (305d7-e2). Socrates observes in an aside to Crito that the speechwriters maintain this position ‘εἰκότως’ (305d7), though it is ‘plausible rather than true’ (εὐπρέπειαν μᾶλλον ἢ ἀλήθειαν, 305e5-6). I argue that what Socrates means by this is that their defense falls into a class of rhetorical argument known as the εἰκός argument, or the argument from likelihood. Socrates thus refrains from dismissing the speechwriters’ art as a mere imitation of a good art only because in the immediate dialectical context he responds to the speechwriters’ λόγος in kind: his opponent’s defense is an εἰκός argument; the partaking argument is a ‘reverse εἰκός argument’.

In section §2 I defend this claim by briefly explaining the nature and function of εἰκός ar-

guments in the rhetorical tradition. By drawing on recent work in the scholarly literature, I explain that εἰκός arguments are arguments from ‘likelihood’ because they are grounded in the social expectations of the audience. I conclude this section by explaining the technique of the ‘reverse εἰκός’. This is a method of overthrowing one εἰκός argument by means of another which reverses the likelihood of the former’s conclusion.

On the basis of this account I turn in section §3 to the analysis of two near doubles of the speechwriters’ λόγος: Isocrates 10.5 (the fifth paragraph of his *Helenaie encomium*) and *Gorgias* 485a3-e2. I demonstrate that both passages are εἰκός arguments. I infer that the speechwriters’ λόγος in the *Euthydemus* is therefore an εἰκός argument also. I then demonstrate that Socrates’ partaking argument is a reverse εἰκός argument. The reversal involves three basis steps. First, it takes over the speechwriters’ premise that anyone who partakes μετρίως of both philosophy and politics is more likely to succeed in life than one who is wholly immersed in these arts. Next, Socrates points out that insofar as men are likely to be *benefitted* by either philosophy or politics, both of these arts must be *good* things. But if that is so, then it is after all more *unlikely* that the speechwriters and their art will reap the fruits of wisdom: they will place third behind philosophy and politics. The social conviction to which this claim is εἰκός or congruent is that having less than the whole of two goods is less beneficial than having their wholes.

Socrates’ appropriation of the εἰκός argument is successful from one point of view: as a piece of rhetoric, the partaking argument is actually more persuasive than the argument it reverses. However, precisely because Socrates responds to his opponent by reversal, his inference must leave in place the speechwriters’ starting point that they stand between and par-

take of philosophy and politics. But this is not something that Socrates genuinely believes.

In section §4 I explain why Socrates rejects the speechwriters’ assumption. If rhetoric or its practitioners partake of philosophy and politics, and the latter are good arts, rhetoric will turn out to be a *partially good art*. The same will follow for eristic. (For there is abundant evidence in the *Euthydemus* that the sophistic duo will defend their superiority in wisdom along precisely the same lines as the speechwriters’ λόγος.) However, a causal thesis regarding goodness and wisdom which Socrates and Cleinias discovered in the first protreptic episode entails that the good-making component of a good art is wisdom, and the bad-making component of a bad art is ignorance. It follows that if rhetoric partakes of philosophy and politics, rhetoric and its practitioners are *partially wise*. (The same follows for eristic and its practitioners.) However, as our analysis of partaking in section §1 reveals, a necessary condition of X partaking of another art Y is that X aims at the same end as Y. But there is abundant evidence in the *Euthydemus* that Socrates takes both rhetoric and eristic to aim at pleasure; and pleasure is not the end of either philosophy or politics (rightly conceived). It follows that neither rhetoric nor eristic partakes of philosophy and the political art. I argue that the proper relation that obtains between the former and latter pair of arts is *imitation*, not *partaking*. I provide a rigorous definition of each relation that explains why this is so. (To anticipate: knowledge of an art Y by another art X is not required in order for X to imitate Y since an imitating art (or pseudo-art) does not aim at the same end as its object of imitation.)

In section §4 I draw two main conclusions from my analysis of the partaking argument. The first is that Socrates’ appropriation of a rhetorical mode of argument conforms to my

definition of imitation. Thus both eristics, rhetoricians, and Socrates are imitators. However, the air of paradox of this result is removed once it is seen that Socrates and his protreptic rivals do not imitate the same things: the sophists and the speechwriters ignorantly imitate philosophy and the political art; by contrast, Socrates (in the partaking argument) imitates the art of the rhetorician.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, while the sophists and speechwriters partake of neither philosophy nor politics, the relation that Socrates and Socratic dialectic bear to philosophy and politics is partaking. This entails that Socrates is *partially wise*. I explain the proper sense we must attach to the claim that Socratic dialectic is a mere partaker of both philosophy and the political craft.

My second conclusion regards Socrates' purpose in 'performing' the partaking argument in the first place. I argue that he does so for Crito's benefit. Crito is deeply attracted to the 'plausibility' of the speechwriters' defense: it is congruent with his social convictions as an Athenian gentleman. Socrates purposefully declines to disabuse Crito of the belief that it is rhetoric, and not Socratic dialectic that stands between philosophy and politics. But he enjoins Crito to work out for himself the nature of philosophy ('the thing itself', *αὐτὸ τὸ πράγμα*, 307b6-c4). It follows that the epilogue of the *Euthydemus* returns both Crito and the reader to the central problem of the dialogue: the discrimination of the sophist, rhetorician, and philosopher.

## §1 IMITATION, PARTAKING, AND TRUTH-LIKENESS

By way of a first step toward the explanation and defense of these claims, we must begin by noting the dramatic context of the partaking argument within the epilogue of the dialogue.

At the commencement of the epilogue (304b6-305b3), Socrates concludes his rehearsal of his encounter with Euthydemus and Dionysodorus and addresses Crito once again directly, repeating the suggestion he made in the first outer frame (272b-d) that Crito should join him in making himself a pupil of the eristic pair. Crito demurs: while he is a lover of listening (*φιλήκοος*) to arguments, he cannot imagine himself ever employing the brothers' distasteful mode of refutation (304c6-d2). He then relates an uncomfortable encounter he had with a man who, like Crito, had been in the audience of the inner dialogue. Crito tells Socrates that this unnamed person ---who he says has a high opinion of himself as a speechwriter---declared 'philosophy' a worthless activity, and roundly condemned both the sophists for their mode of conversation as well as Socrates for subjecting himself to a pair of men 'who care nothing about what they say, but just snatch at every word'.<sup>4</sup> Crito continues that, while in the face of this attack on 'philosophy' he attempted to defend the activity as a charming (*χαρίεν*, 304e6) thing, he nevertheless agrees with the critic that Socrates deserves reproach for publicly putting himself at the disposal of such worthless practitioners of it (cp. 306e3-307a2).

In response to Crito's qualified endorsement of the speechwriter's condemnation of the foregoing discussion, Socrates inquires not after the *identity*, but the specific *occupation* of the man:

T1: Crito, men like these are very strange. Still, I don't yet know what to say in return. What sort of man was this who came up and attacked philosophy? Was he one of those clever persons who contend in the law courts, an orator? Or was he one of those who equip such men for battle, a writer of the speeches which the orators use? (305b4-305e4).